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Lincoln's Forgotten Ally: Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt of Kentucky

Andrew H. Talkov

Review

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Leonard, Elizabeth D. *Lincoln's Forgotten Ally: Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt of Kentucky.* University of North Carolina Press, $40.00 ISBN 978-0-8078-3500-5

Understanding Lincoln's Support Network

Growing-up in the 1970s meant that the first civil war to which I was exposed occurred in a "galaxy far… far… away." As such, the names Skywalker and Solo are as much a part of my consciousness as Lee and Grant were a century earlier. It always bothered me that there was one member of the Rebel Alliance who never received a medal for his service or a kiss from Princess Leia. This X-wing pilot defended Luke's rear and allowed the up-and-coming Jedi to destroy the Death Star. When Luke's gunner was killed during the Battle of Hoth, it was he who took down the elephant-like AT-AT. He even delivered the fatal shot against the Empire's partially constructed second Death Star. The name of this unsung hero was Wedge Antilles and as I delved into Elizabeth D. Leonard's *Lincoln's Forgotten Ally: Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt of Kentucky*, I was reminded of poor Wedge. Both Wedge and Holt were critical participants at crucial moments in their respective sagas, but their names have been forgotten—until now.

Relying on a seemingly endless collection of letters and public documents, Elizabeth Leonard skillfully and meticulously reconstructs Holt's 84-year life. Born into a prominent Kentucky family, Joseph, the bright, bookish, and serious second-born son of John Holt and Eleanor Stephens served as the "repository of their greatest hopes" (8). At fifteen, Holt began attending St. Joseph's College in Bardstown, Kentucky. A conflict with the college president regarding a perceived slight to Holt's reputation resulted in his leaving the school and revealed a core component of Holt's personality. The encounter demonstrated Holt's "keen intellect, his strong sense of self-respect and personal honor, and his eloquence, fearlessness, and independence." Leonard also suggests that it

exposed his sensitivity to personal slights and an unwillingness to forgive (11-12).

Holt initially settled in Elizabethtown, Kentucky where he set up a law office but he soon relocated to Louisville. To friends and family, the move appeared to mark his ascent to power and notoriety. In Louisville, Holt received his first public office—commonwealth's attorney for Jefferson County—and learned that his growing prominence was accompanied by public attacks from critics—a slight for which he had already demonstrated little tolerance. After delivering a speech at the 1835 Democratic national convention, Holt earned national recognition. During the next two decades, he intermittently applied his talents on behalf of the party. In 1856, Holt delivered pro-Buchanan speeches across Kentucky. Notwithstanding his own ambivalence toward slavery he lashed out at the "Black Republicans" and abolitionists as examples of political extremism that would destroy the republic. Moving to Washington, Holt was appointed Commissioner of Patents followed by Postmaster General.

In the aftermath of John Brown's 1859 raid at Harpers Ferry, Holt used what power he had to restore calm and end radicalism on both sides by suppressing the dissemination of "incendiary publications." Beginning with the election 1860 and ending with Lincoln's inauguration, Leonard's narrative of Holt's unexpected elevation to Secretary of War is not only dramatic, but it serves as a revelation to anyone interested in the early months of the secession crisis. By accepting such a post, wrote Leonard, Holt had determined that the importance of the survival of the Union was more important than Kentucky, the South, or the institution of slavery. Leonard had exceptional material to work with and the letters exchanged between friends and family, many of which try to convince him to join the Confederate cause, illustrate the personal conflicts that existed along the border between North and South.

Thrust into a position of importance at a critical time, Holt's short term as Secretary of War may be one of Holt's finest moments. It was Holt who encouraged Buchanan to send reinforcements to the beleaguered Fort Sumter – a tactic that served as an important test of Confederate resolve. Holt's War Department discovered, and cancelled, orders by his predecessor—a Virginian—to transfer federal munitions to various southern forts. Holt also took responsibility for organizing the defense of Washington and initiated the mobilization of state militias. It was Holt's department that uncovered the plot to disrupt Lincoln's inauguration and his vigilance forestalled bloodshed during the

final days of the Buchanan administration. When the *New York Herald* announced on March 5 that “a new administration is born," it was, in large part, due to Holt’s service in the War Department.

The governor’s position of “neutrality" notwithstanding, Kentuckians began enlisting in both the Union and Confederate armies. The geographic and political importance of the “Bluegrass State" to the Union weighed heavily on Lincoln and Holt was tapped to guarantee its loyalty to the government. Although a lifelong Democrat, Holt expressed an admiration for Lincoln who, like himself, “has the courage to look traitors in the face" (146). Traveling to Kentucky, Holt delivered a number of well-attended and widely acclaimed pro-Union speeches. “If this government is to be destroyed," wrote Holt, “ask yourselves are you willing it shall be recorded in history that Kentucky stood by in the greatness of her strength and lifted not a hand to stay the catastrophe" (147). Although military events would play a role, Holt’s diplomatic efforts on behalf of the Lincoln administration were instrumental in keeping the state in the Union.

The issuing of a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, not only changed the meaning of the war but how it would be prosecuted. As such, Lincoln appointed Holt to serve as Judge Advocate General—a position he retained until his retirement in December 1875. For his part, Holt determined to support the president and his policies, to enforce emancipation, and to make use of all legal means at his command to strike against the nation’s enemies, wherever he found them (163). During the next two years—during which he met with Lincoln nearly every day—the uncompromising Holt became one of Lincoln’s most dedicated allies in the prosecution of the war. In one of its first acts, Holt’s office oversaw the highly publicized court martial of Maj. Gen. Fitz John Porter. Holt also contributed significantly to the Lieber Code (General Order No. 100) which served as instructions for the behavior of Union armies. The ideas codified by Leiber—with Holt’s input—laid the foundation for international conventions governing the conduct of troops in the twentieth-century. Coming when his appointment did, Holt proved instrumental in the enforcement of emancipation and Lincoln’s suspension of the Writ of Habeas corpus—both issues of military rather than civil law.

Holt’s fidelity to Lincoln increased following the president’s death. Responsible for overseeing the trial of the Lincoln conspirators, Leonard suggests that the trial did not live up to his longstanding and well-deserved reputation for being evenhanded. Holt appears to have been affected by the war,

the weight of his grief over Lincoln's death, and his rage against those who so boldly and shamelessly tried to destroy the nation. His handling of the trial was, and remains, controversial and his public image was irreparably damaged. Although, to some, he was an example of unwavering Unionism, to others—including many Kentuckians—he was attacked as the symbol of Union vengeance against white southerners who had fought so valiantly for their region's independence from federal domination. With the same intolerance he demonstrated when he was seventeen-years-old, Holt was unwilling to allow personal assaults to go unanswered and he spent the rest of his life defending his actions during the Lincoln trials.

As Appomattox fell further into the past, Holt observed with distress and disappointment the indications that Reconstruction would, in the end, fail to make good on the promises of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Federal army's victory on the battlefield. During a life that spanned eight-and-a-half decades, Holt's relationship with Lincoln represents a two-year period told in a single chapter of *Lincoln's Forgotten Ally*. In bringing Lincoln's killers to trial and engaging in the war that would define how it, and he, was remembered, Holt's association with the martyred president continued to the end of his life. In this way Holt remained Lincoln's ally even after his death. Leonard's well-written and thoroughly researched work demonstrates how their association with such a significant event changed the expected course of all who lived through it. Although the relationship between Wedge Antilles and Luke Skywalker ended with the credits, Holt's brief association with Lincoln ended with the destruction of two aspiring political careers. One became a paragon while and the other had long been written out of the history. Thanks to Elizabeth Leonard, Judge Advocate General Holt will no longer be forgotten.

Andrew H. Talkov is the Head of Program Development and Coordinator for Virginia's Civil War at the Virginia Historical Society (Richmond, VA) and co-curator of the Civil War sesquicentennial exhibition An American Turning Point: The Civil War in Virginia. He can be contacted at atalkov@vahistorical.org.

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